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SUBJECT: RADICAL ISLAM IN MONTENEGRO

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over the last decade, fundamentalist Islam, known here as Wahhabism, has established a small foothold among Montenegro's 110,000 Muslims. There are probably a few hundred adherents in country, concentrated in majority-Muslim towns of Plav and Rozaje, close to Kosovo and Albania. The so-called Wahhabis, who have links with Bosnia and Serbia (and similar groups in some Western European cities), initially challenged mainstream Muslim authorities in several towns and villages. After a perceived crackdown on extremists in Serbia's Sandzak in 2007, however, they appear to have adopted a lower profile. While continued economic deprivation in northern Montenegro, where most Muslims live, could radicalize some young Muslims in the longer term, Montenegro's centuries-old tradition of moderate Islam and healthy inter-ethnic relations provide a bulwark against the spread of Wahhabism. In fact, Embassy personnel have repeatedly experienced abundant outpourings of warmth toward the United States among the local Muslim (Slav and Albanian) population. END SUMMARY.

Muslims in Montenegro

2. (U) Montenegro's 110,000 Muslims (almost 18 percent of the total population, according to the 2003 census) are divided into three groups: Bosniaks (8 percent of Montenegro's population), "Muslims" (5 percent), and Albanians (5 percent; note that some Albanian-Montenegrins are Catholics). Bosniaks and "Muslims" are Slavs whose ancestors converted to Islam under Ottoman Turkish rule. Yugoslavia used the term "Muslim" after 1971 to describe the ethnicity of its Slavic Muslim population. Following Bosnia's lead in the 1990s, some Montenegrin Muslims have advocated that Slavic Muslims call themselves "Bosniaks." Both "Bosniak" and "Muslim" ethnicities are recognized in Montenegro's Constitution.

3. (U) Almost three-quarters of Montenegro's Bosniaks/Muslims live in the country's northern municipalities, where they constitute majorities in Rozaje and Plav (the latter also has a large Albanian Muslim population) and significant minorities in Bijelo Polje, Berane, and Pljevlja. Albanian Muslims also are concentrated in Ulcinj, the Tuzi district of Podgorica, and in Bar (which also has a sizeable Bosniak/Muslim population). Virtually all Montenegrin Muslims are Sunnis. Forty years of Yugoslav socialist rule secularized many Muslims, and the

Ottoman-Turkish religious legacy and Balkan intermingling has meant that the vast majority of observant Muslims (Slavic and Albanian) practice a moderate, tolerant version of Islam.

The Arrival of "Wahhabism" in Montenegro

14. (SBU) Fundamentalist Islam, commonly called "Wahhabism" in the Balkans, spread in the 1990s from Bosnia to the Muslim Sandzak area, which straddles the Serbia-Montenegro border. It also appeared in Kosovo and Albania. Reis Rifat Fejzic, head of Montenegro's Islamic Community, told us he first noticed the phenomenon in Montenegro in 1999-2000, when a few Montenegrins who had visited and/or studied in Sarajevo and in Arab states began practicing and promulgating an austere, "Arab" brand of Islam.

15. (SBU) Tufik Softic, a Berane journalist, told us he interviewed several of the first Montenegrin Islamic fundamentalists in Plav in 2003. While they did not call themselves Wahhabis (they said they practiced "original Islam"), their dress, behavior, and interpretation of the Koran were consistent with the strict Islam practiced in some Arab countries. Their leader was Sead Jasavic, a local student of Islamic law in Saudi Arabia who frequently visited Plav, where he recruited followers. Softic said Jasavic and other Wahhabis quickly gained adherents, in part because Montenegro's "poorly educated" mainstream imams were at a disadvantage against aggressive and self-assured newcomers claiming to practice "true Islam."

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16. (SBU) Between 2003 and 2007, there were several incidents in northern municipalities in which Wahhabis accosted imams for what they deemed to be incorrect interpretations of the Koran, and even tried to take over mosques. Softic said that Jasavic and his followers attempted to take control of the Islamic Community branch in Plav in 2003, but were outvoted. For a time, Softic said, the Plav Islamic Community physically guarded the town's mosques to prevent their occupation. Softic also told us that an imam in Lozna, a village outside of Bijelo Polje, was attacked by Wahhabis in 2005. In an interview with another journalist, the imam said a group of 20 Wahhabis began to frequent his mosque and harass him and other worshipers. (Note: We understand that the imam retained control of the Lozna mosque.)

The Wahhabis: Who and How Many?

17. (SBU) In mid-2007, the Montenegrin Agency for National Security (ANB) stated there were more than 100 "registered Islamic extremists" in country. Our Muslim contacts usually cite numbers ranging from 100 - 200 - the Reis Fejzic told us 150-200, for example - and occasionally more. Zeljko Madzgalj, a Bijelo Polje journalist, estimated that there were approximately 300 Wahhabis in Plav, 200 in Rozaje, 50 in Bijelo Polje, and smaller numbers in Berane, Ulcinj, and other municipalities, including Podgorica. (Note: All interlocutors agreed that the number of Montenegrin Albanian Wahhabis is very small.)

¶8. (SBU) Several contacts personally knew Wahhabis. Avdul Kurpejovic, head of the Matica Muslimaska NGO, said his nephew, who lived in Rozaje, became a Wahhabi in 2003 or 2004. His conversion mystified the family, since he had not studied abroad and had not previously been religious. Kurpejovic said the young man kept to himself, worshipping regularly with fellow believers in a section of a mosque in Rozaje. Rifat Veskovik, head of the Democratic Union of Muslims and Bosniaks in Montenegro, also told us that "about 30" acquaintances from Bijelo Polje had become Wahhabis. Virtually all now lived in other places, such as Rozaje, Novi Pazar, and Switzerland.

¶9. (SBU) Several interlocutors claimed that Wahhabis tended to recruit poorly educated, previously non-religious villagers from Muslim-majority areas. However, others said they knew Montenegrins who had become Wahhabis while studying or working in Western Europe. Very few contacts knew of Muslims who had studied in Middle Eastern countries (with the exception of Turkey). Sead Sadikovic, a Bijelo Polje journalist, told us "not more than 30-50" Montenegrins had studied in Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

Networks and Funding

¶10. (SBU) The Wahhabis do not appear to be centrally organized, although our interlocutors agree that the communities are in regular contact. Several sources noted the Wahhabis seemed well funded (one rumor is that they are paid for recruiting new adherents), and speculated that the money came from Islamic humanitarian organizations (the ANB also has said publicly that it believes some funding comes from such organizations). The Reis, Softic, and others mentioned connections with Muslim communities in Luxembourg and Vienna. A number of sources have alleged a link between Montenegro and a radical Vienna-based imam named "Ebu Muhammed" (aka Nedzad Balkan); other press accounts have mentioned links to the "Active Islamic Youth Organization" in Sarajevo and Vienna.

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¶11. (SBU) Ties to Bosnia and Serbia are better documented. Softic said between from 2003-2006, Jasavic held annual Islamic youth camps and at least one paramilitary exercise in the Plav area for Wahhabis from Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia. According to Softic, a Serbian Muslim killed by Serbian authorities during the 2007 round-up of radical Islamists in Novi Pazar had attended one of Jasavic's camps. Madzgalj also told us that there were rumors that several Serbian Wahhabis had found refuge in Plav and Rozaje after the crackdown.

¶12. (SBU) Veskovik mentioned that a group of Montenegrin Wahhabis had moved to a Slavic Muslim village near Pec in Kosovo (likely Vitimirica), but after conflicts with the Kosovar authorities had either returned to Montenegro or gone to Bosnia or Western Europe. An April article in a Belgrade newspaper speculated that Semir Kojic, the leader of the Wahhabi community in Vitimirica, had moved to Montenegro. In August 2008, "Dan" reported that ten Wahhabis from Plav and Rozaje attended a regional Wahhabi meeting in a village near Bosanska Krupa in Bosnia.

Islamic Community and Wahhabis: An Uneasy Truce?

¶13. (SBU) Despite clashes between Islamic Community members and Wahhabis before 2007, several contacts charged that mainstream Muslim authorities had been reluctant to confront the fundamentalists. Softic said he came under pressure from the Islamic Community not to publish his original articles, for example. Another source suggested that the arrival of younger imams trained in Arab countries (or in Sarajevo by teachers from Arab countries) had made Montenegrin Muslims more receptive to fundamentalist views.

¶14. (SBU) The Reis, however, said he publicly called on the Islamic Community to distance itself from the radicals (after the 2007 Novi Pazar incident, the Reis was quoted as saying that those involved were "people who do not understand Islam as a religion"). The Reis conceded that "some imams might sympathize with Wahhabis," but said he had no proof of this. He also said about 20 of the Community's imams had studied abroad, primarily in Bosnia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The Reis also noted that the Community had recently opened a religious school (madrasa) in Tuzi in part to counter the teachings of Islamic fundamentalists.

¶15. (SBU) Developments in Plav may be illustrative of the complicated relationship between the Community and the Wahhabis. According to Softic, after failing to take over the Plav Islamic Community and following completion of his Saudi studies, Jesavic actually preached for about a year at Plav's reconstructed Sultaniya Mosque (rebuilt with funds from unnamed donors). However, in mid-2007, the Plav Islamic Community declined to renew his contract, reportedly because of his Wahhabi beliefs. In 2008, Jasavic and his followers built their own mosque in the village of Krusevo (near Gusinje), which has become the main Wahhabi center in the Plav area. (Softic also mentioned that another group of Wahhabis had recently settled in the village of Petnjica, near Berane.)

¶16. (SBU) We also note the case of Ferid Orahovic, formerly imam of the Osmanagica Mosque in Podgorica. The press has reported that Orahovic, who graduated from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, has "Wahhabi sympathies." In January 2008, Orahovic joined several other imams in accusing Reis Fejzic of illegally extending his mandate (the Reis's term now expires this year, and elections will be held this summer). In April 2009, Montenegrin police filed charges against Orahovic for allegedly threatening to "kill and burn" the Reis, whom he accused of "being elected in violation of the religious rules" (Orahovic denied making the threat).

¶17. (SBU) Earlier this month, the Reis closed the Osmanagica

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Mosque, leading to protests by 40-50 believers. The mosque was subsequently reopened, but with a new imam, and the press reported that the Reis had offered Orahovic a position teaching at the madrasa. On June 14, the daily paper "Vijesti" quoted a member of the mosque saying that Fejzic "managed to make our former imam (Orahovic), who taught us the true religion rather than innovation, bow to his will." (Note: A high-ranking Islamic Community official told us recently that Orahovic "almost became a Wahhabi but is now back on the path to becoming

a good Muslim.")

Wahhabism's Limited Appeal

¶18. (SBU) Most of our contacts at present are not overly alarmed by phenomenon of radical Islam. For one thing, despite earlier clashes (and possible links to overseas radicals in Vienna and other places), few could cite specific threats from Wahhabis toward other Montenegrins (including Muslims), the Montenegrin authorities, or Americans/Europeans in country. In addition, most of our contacts professed to be unfamiliar with both the word and the practice of "takfir."

¶19. (SBU) Our interlocutors also believe that the rate of Wahhabi expansion and influence has slowed over the past two years. In particular, the 2007 Novi Pazar incident appears to have been a watershed, whether because the Montenegrin (and other regional) authorities cracked down, because the Islamic Community began to more openly confront the Wahhabis, or because the Wahhabis themselves began to take a less confrontational tact. (To illustrate his assertion that the Wahhabis have retrenched, Softic noted that Jasavic has not held his annual youth camps since the Novi Pazar arrests in 2007. He also related how he had been surprised to see Jasavic taunted by a group of young spectators at a football match in Plav in early June - "this would never have happened a few years ago," he said.)

¶20. (SBU) Furthermore, Montenegro's centuries-old tradition of moderate Islam tends to make most of its Muslims wary of radical beliefs. Montenegrins of all faiths also are intermingled in a way that is not the case in Serbian Sandzak (the exceptions being majority Muslim areas of Rozaje and Plav, of course). In addition, Montenegro has not hosted significant numbers of Arab nationals or organizations, and Montenegrin Muslims have by and large not been radicalized by the conflicts experienced by fellow believers in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia. In fact, relations between the Muslim community and the Montenegrin authorities have, since the mid-1990s split from Milosevic, been quite good, with Muslims (Slavs and Albanians) being a key pillar of support for the GoM. These factors act as significant bulwarks against the spread of fundamentalist Islam here.

¶21. A good example occurred in late June in Bar at the re-opening of a mosque attended by the Ambassador. Virtually all of the speakers praised the United States (the benefactor of the mosque restoration was a naturalized American from Bar) and harmonious interethnic relations in Bar. In fact, the organizers had invited representatives of the Orthodox and Catholic churches, as well as the (ethnically Montenegrin) Mayor to play leading roles in the celebration. After the ceremony, participants - including representatives of the Montenegrin Muslim diaspora living in the U.S. -- showered the Ambassador with outpourings of good will and friendship. "America is great again," a prominent community leader wrote us afterwards.

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